

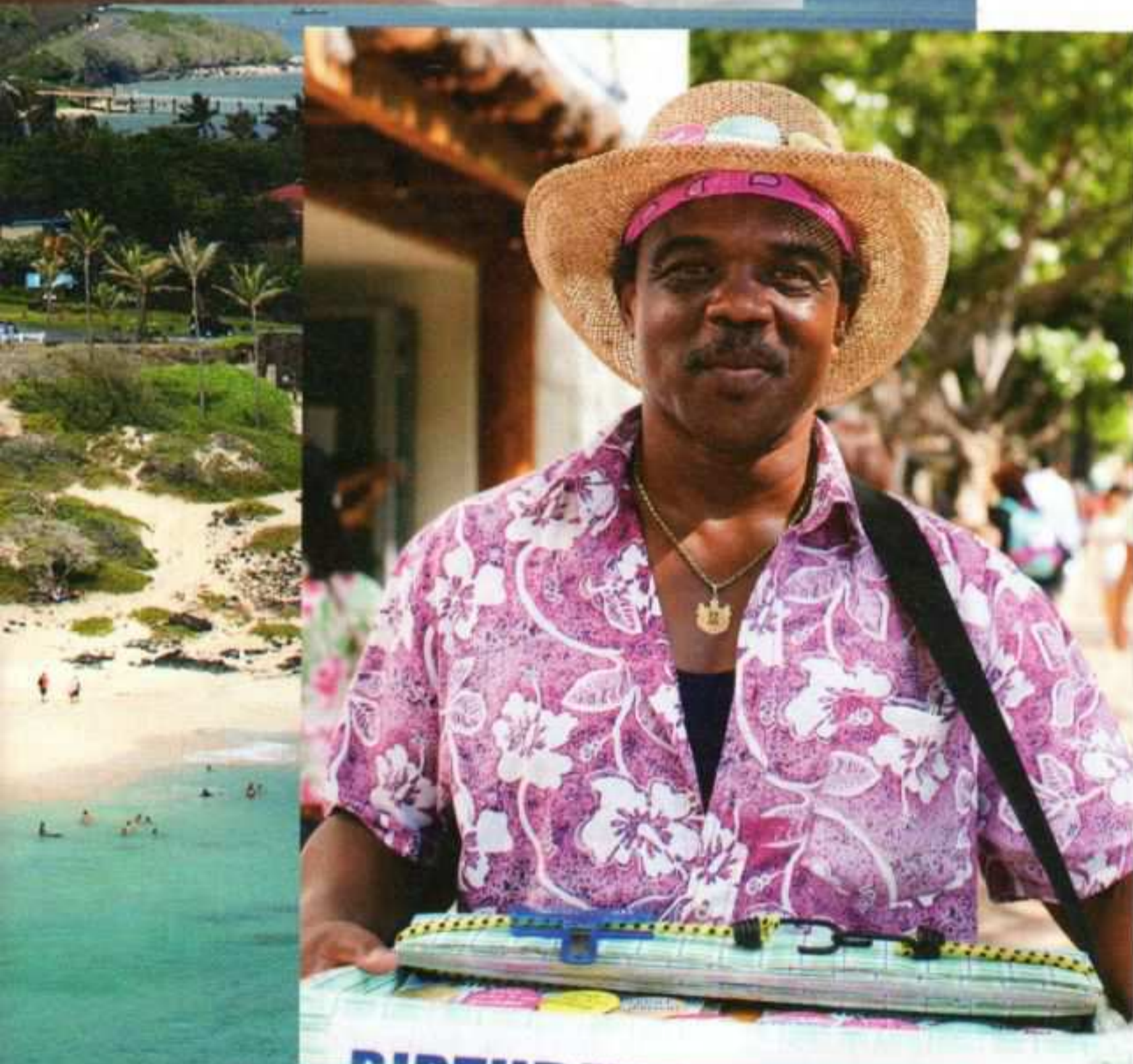


GLOBAL  
ROAMING

# Honolulu Food

Although famed for its beaches, it is the cuisine of this archipelago that really tells the story of Hawaii. Edwina Dick explores its capital and largest city Honolulu, where the food is as big, bold, and exhilarating as its surf.

Photography Katie Kaars



Makapu'u Point, Oahu. From top: organic lettuce, pancetta, manchego, cherry tomato and walnut salad from Town in Kaimuki; a Honolulu local in Waikiki.

Hawaii may be America's 50th state, but there's not much that's 'apple pie' about this compelling Pacific archipelago. In fact, if the said pie was Hawaiian, it'd be more like mango, cinnamon and adzuki bean, with *li hing mui* (salty dried plum) and shaved ice on top.

Bustling and dynamic, Honolulu, which is spread over the southeastern side of Oahu, is the true urban incarnation of a melting pot. Thoroughly modern for the most part, yet still infused with the gentle Hawaiian spirit of *aloha*, the capital is home to nearly 350,000 people. Among this cosmopolitan population, the majority include people of native Hawaiian ancestry, first-generation immigrants and the descendants of agricultural workers who arrived from Asia and the Americas in the past 150 years.

Reflecting the cultural diversity and peaceful, unpretentious nature of the place is Honolulu's food scene – constantly evolving, impossible to define and thrilling to experience. "My dad is half Hawaiian, half Portuguese, and my mum is half Japanese, half Scottish," explains 13-year-old Britney, a Honolulu native. "Except for the *haggis* factor, she's very average around here!" laughs her father, Benedito.

The two are lunching at Haili's Hawaiian Food. They tuck in to *kalua* pig (pork wrapped in *ti* (taro) leaves, and cooked in an *imu*, an underground oven) and *lau lau* (pork and salted butterfish also cooked underground in *ti* leaves), as well as *ake* (pronounced ar-ki) on the side. *Kalua* pork is one of Hawaii's most popular dishes for visitors, too, but *ake* – rinsed liver, *inamona* (pounded and roasted *kukui* nut), *limu* (seaweed), salt and chilli – is more of an acquired taste.

Haili's is owned and operated by Rachel Haili and her sister Lorraine, whose Hawaiian father and Chinese mother started the business in the 1950s. Located just a few kilometres behind Waikiki on Kapahulu Avenue (which extends directly from the beach), Haili's Hawaiian Food is housed in an apricot art deco building among some of Honolulu's favourite food stops, surf equipment shops and exquisitely shambolic antique stores.

Stroll the length of Kapahulu, and you'll be among the locals, who treat their kids to a cool and colourful treat at Waiola Shave Ice, grab *malasadas* (yeast doughnuts) from Leonard's bakery, and queue at the famous Rainbow Drive-In for relaxed 'plate lunches'. "It's true that the plate lunch was born in the plantations," says Rachel, whose grandparents came from China to work in the sugar fields. "The workers, who were local, as well as from Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico... from all over the place, swapped food as a sign of friendship, and probably also to keep life interesting."

The ubiquitous plate lunch, with its endless combinations, is available right across Hawaii, and typically mixes meats (such as



Clockwise from below: Ray's Kiawe broiled chicken, a barbecue restaurant specialising in chicken in Haleiwa; Waikiki Beach; dragon fruit for sale at a roadside stall in North Shore. Opposite page: Sandy Beach, Oahu, said to be a favourite of President Barack Obama, who was born in Hawaii.

Korean barbecued chicken, lau lau or kalua pig) with fish (grilled or raw, *poke*-style) and casseroles with rice, cold macaroni and salad. It's probably the quintessential example of the fusion that is Hawaiian food. Fusion has never been about a trend here – it's simply the way people have been eating for a more than a century.

The Chinese were the first contract labourers to arrive on the Hawaiian islands in the early 1850s, and after being burnt to the ground, and rebuilt twice, the historic Chinatown district in Honolulu remains one of the most popular spots to eat in the city. The most fun and efficient way to cover ground here, and discover foods unique to this area, is to go on a 'hole-in-the-wall' tour with Hawaii Food Tours, run by ex-chef and well-known critic and food writer Matthew Gray.

First stop is at a small window to try *manapua*. Descended from the Chinese pork bun, these soft, doughy wonders are filled with chicken curry, Portuguese sausage, Chinese black sugar and more. "In Honolulu, we take these to the office, like you guys would with sandwiches," explains Mike, Matthew's colleague.

The next four hours are filled with visits to vintage-style food factories, produce markets and little shops and eateries. Sampling 17 different local treats including spam *msubi* (sushi-style spam), crack-seed (Chinese and Hawaiian dried fruits, nuts, seeds and candies), and 'five layers of heaven' roast pork, even the most well-travelled food lover will come across new flavours on this expedition. Heavenly Japanese-inspired *mochi* ice-cream balls come towards the end of the tour.



Japanese culture in Hawaii has been as influential as Chinese, and tasty, authentic Japanese meals are available on almost every block in Honolulu. "If you love sashimi and premium Japanese food, it's as good as being in Tokyo here," says chef Jevic Acain of critically acclaimed fine-diner, Morimoto (owned by American Iron Chef Morimoto), overlooking the Waikiki Marina. For the ultimate in casual Japanese dining, head to Shirokiya Department store at the open-air Ala Moana Center, a few minutes by trolley from Waikiki. With an entire floor dedicated to freshly prepared takeaway, from bento, to

ramen and *takoyaki*, and everything in between, this place is pure sensory overload.

Combining the best of Asian and traditional Hawaiian foods is the much-lauded contemporary master of Hawaiian-style fusion, Tokyo-born Roy Yamaguchi. With six Roy's restaurants dotted around the islands, Roy's cuisine is loved by the locals, and to experience it is a right-of-passage for visitors. "The notion of slow food is actually centuries old," says Roy, who demonstrates boundless respect for the origins of his food, as well as the different ethnic cuisines he draws upon. "By teaming with local farmers and fishermen to provide us with the best produce and local flavours, our reliance on each other ensures the continuation of generations of harmony."

In 1991, Roy and 11 of his peers formalised their commitment to use as much fresh Hawaiian produce as possible in their Pacific fusion style of food. This movement (and cuisine style) became known as Hawaii Regional Cuisine, or HRC, and is admired globally.

## HAWAIIAN FOOD

### CHILI PEPPER

**WATER:** a fiery brine made from Hawaiian chillies, garlic, ginger, vinegar and water.

**HAUPIA:** a coconut milk-based dessert in a jelly-like block.

**IMU:** a traditional underground oven.

**LOCOMOCO:** a local fast-food that comprises white rice and a hamburger patty, topped with a fried egg and gravy.

**LOMI SALMON:** a combination of salted, diced salmon, tomatoes, crushed ice and green onions.

**POI:** a staple purple food made from the cooked and pounded root of the taro plant.

**POKE:** a dish made of chopped raw *ahi* (a local fish), dressed in soy, seaweed, sesame oil and chopped onion.

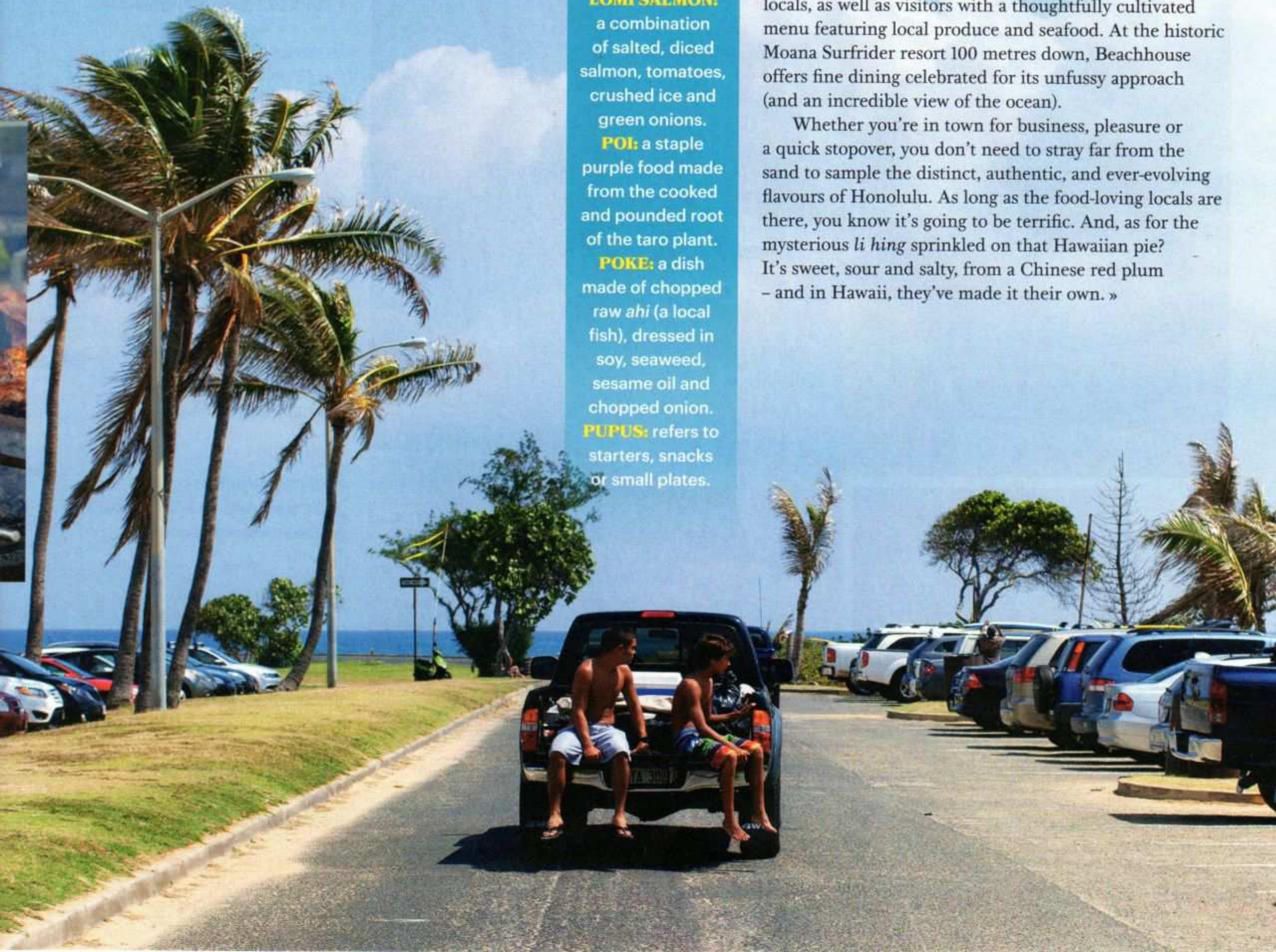
**PUPUS:** refers to starters, snacks or small plates.

Working to the mantra of "local first, organic whenever possible, with aloha always", chef Ed Kenney (who is visiting Australia for the Melbourne Food & Wine Festival in March) represents a new generation of chefs, inspired by the HRC ethos, but presenting their food with a contemporary, pared-back edge. At his restaurant Town in Kaimuki (above Waikiki), Ed and his crew work with island produce (including hard-to-source varieties, and naturally grown sea vegetables), to create his rustic yet refined signature style. "We prepare our ingredients with an Italian sensibility... we just add a little oil and fresh herbs," says Ed.

Ed's determination to only serve local produce is matched by his motivation to make this food a life-changer for the disadvantaged youth of Oahu. A director of a community organic farm program for young people, Ed was named 'The First Lady's Chef in Hawaii' on the Whitehouse Food Initiatives blog, Obama Foodarama, for his excellent cuisine and his role as community educator.

Back down the hill, many of the large hotels on the shores of Waikiki, which for a long time wore a reputation for average, overpriced tourist *luaus* (a traditional Hawaiian feast), are now also producing superb new-style Hawaiian food, from home-grown ingredients. Azure restaurant, at the iconic Royal Hawaiian Hotel draws locals, as well as visitors with a thoughtfully cultivated menu featuring local produce and seafood. At the historic Moana Surfrider resort 100 metres down, Beachhouse offers fine dining celebrated for its unfussy approach (and an incredible view of the ocean).

Whether you're in town for business, pleasure or a quick stopover, you don't need to stray far from the sand to sample the distinct, authentic, and ever-evolving flavours of Honolulu. As long as the food-loving locals are there, you know it's going to be terrific. And, as for the mysterious *li hing* sprinkled on that Hawaiian pie? It's sweet, sour and salty, from a Chinese red plum – and in Hawaii, they've made it their own. »





Clockwise from left: handwoven palm-frond hats and baskets; and leis, all for sale along Waikiki; swimmers and surfers at Waimea Bay, another North Shore beach; Kahuku papayas at a roadside stall in North Shore.

**STAY**

**THE MODERN HONOLULU**

A relative newcomer, The Modern is an oasis of cool. Blending urban style with a pared-back Hawaiian beach feel, The Modern epitomises warm chic. It is also home to critically acclaimed Japanese fine diner, Morimoto Waikiki. **1775 Ala Moana Blvd, +1 808 954 7427, themodernhonolulu.com.**

**OUTRIGGER WAIKIKI SHORE**

The Outrigger offers the only self-contained apartments and studios right on Waikiki Beach. **2161 Kalia Rd, Honolulu, +1 808 922 3871, outrigger.com.**

**MOANA SURFRIDER, A WESTIN RESORT AND SPA**

Known to the locals as the First Lady of Waikiki, this beautiful landmark was built in the late-19th century. Offering traditional afternoon tea and relaxed fine dining on the spectacular ocean-front verandah, the mood is refined, laidback and welcoming. **2365 Kalakaua Ave, +1 808 922 3111, moana-surfrider.com.**

**EXPERIENCE**

**HAWAII FOOD TOURS**  
hawaiifoodtours.com.

**EAT**

**HAILI'S HAWAIIAN FOOD**  
760 Palani Ave, +1 808 735 8019, hailishawaiianfood.com.

**ROY'S**  
roysrestaurant.com

**TOWN**  
3435 Waiialae Ave, +1 808 735 5900, townkaimuki.com.

**AZURE**  
The Royal Hawaiian, 2259 Kalakaua Ave, +1 808 923 7311, azurewaikiki.com. 📍

